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Toeing the Line: The morality of dancing Pride and Prejudice and Regency culture

Laura Gray

Wright State University - Main Campus

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Gray, Laura, "Toeing the Line: The morality of dancing Pride and Prejudice and Regency culture" (2013).
Pride and Prejudice: The Bicentennial. 2.

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Toeing the Line:

The morality of dancing *Pride and Prejudice* and Regency culture

by Laura Gray

Many of the social interactions in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are reliant upon decidedly ambiguous rules. The characters in the novel are constantly toeing a line between trying to express their feelings in a forthright manner and restricting themselves in order to maintain propriety. No one knows how to maintain a balance between these two actions; as a result, true feelings are hardly ever properly expressed, and their ability to form connections suffers. All of the characters endure this unfortunate phenomenon. In order for the Bennet girls to meet Mr. Bingley, for instance, Mr. Bennet has to meet him, and then he or another male has to introduce the hopeful girls.

Dancing is perhaps the only socially sanctioned institution that allows the characters to fully express their desires or true opinions on a matter. In *Pride and Prejudice* dance conveys a hidden language, a language in which all of the characters are fluent. Asking a lady to dance is a respectable way to state one's romantic intentions, and refusing to dance with someone is synonymous with snubbing them. For example, at the first ball everyone believes that Darcy views the entire assembly with rude disdain because he only dances with those from his own party. Conversely, everyone knows that Mr. Bingley is interested in Jane because he dances with her twice in one night. The majority of Jane and Mr. Bingley's courtship in the first volume revolves around dancing; in fact, they almost only converse at balls. This could be attributed to Jane's need to maintain propriety. Jane, as a very respectable young woman, does not want to do anything "untoward" or "unmannerly," so she turns to her only respectable option for courtship: dancing.

Yes, dancing enabled young people to maneuver around the ambiguous social rules in an innocent manner. However, some people in the Regency era believed that this one loop hole would create bigger and bigger holes in young peoples' morality. For example, in the early-1790's a symposium of Methodist preachers, led by Reverend Wesley, voted to ban dancing masters from English schools. According to Mr. Mark Davis, a fellow Methodist reverend, the symposium's main objection to teaching children to dance was as follows: "When they grow up they will frequent balls and assemblies and in these places gratify all the vanity and lust of their hearts, throw away their money and time, form bad connexions, and ruin themselves probably both in this world and in another" (19).



"To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love; and very lively hopes of Mr. Bingley's heart were already entertained" (Austen 38).

Davis argues this ban in his essay *Thoughts on Dancing*, in which he insists that most young people who learn to dance do not abuse the practice. Davis cites the many instances of dancing in the Bible, and, using these examples as evidence, seeks to prove that dance is merely an innocent, and necessary, expression of joy.

Evidence proves that a debate followed this essay. Thomas Olivers, yet another Methodist reverend, wrote *An Answer to Mr. Mark Davis's Thoughts on Dancing*, in which he set out to systematically destroy all of Mr. Davis's arguments in defense of dancing. He in turn argues that parents should not employ a dance master because dance "fills [their child's] mind with thoughts of the pleasing amusement, and of various other agreeable particulars connected with it" instead of religion (77).

This controversy proves that many people who lived in the Regency era questioned the respectability of dancing. With this in mind, the role of dancing in *Pride and Prejudice* can be seen in a completely different light. While, yes, it would seem that the characters primarily use dancing as a method of stating who they want to marry, their other motivations for dancing should be considered. Several of the characters do not go to balls with the sole intention of finding a husband, but to simply have fun. Lydia and Kitty Bennet are the two characters who are the most zealous for dancing. In fact, their zeal only comes second to their love for officers—with an emphasis on the plurality of the word "officers."

"What a charming amusement for young people!—There is nothing like dancing after all" (58).

Lydia especially talks about dancing with an ever-varying set of men, none of which catch her eye for very long. Even after she marries Wickham she writes to her friend, "Pray make my excuses to Pratt, for not keeping my engagement, and dancing with him to night" (Austen 332). For Lydia, who does not think much of bending the rules of propriety in order to get what she wants, dancing is merely another indulgence in life. Her actions alone prove that dancing is not always meant to maintain the characters' respectability in *Pride and Prejudice*. Depending on what a character wants in life, the innocent diversion can quickly become an excuse for impropriety. No matter what the motivation, it is evident that dancing is a very effective social tool in the novel, as well as in regency culture.



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